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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AHAD AL-IRAQ SHOWS PROMISE IN BUILDING

CROSS-ETHNIC, CROSS-SECTARIAN COALITION FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS  
AND HUMAN RIGHTS

1. (U) Summary. 'Ahad al-Iraq (Iraq's Promise) held a press conference in Baghdad on December 12 to announce that a cross-sectarian, cross-ethnic group of more than 270 politicians, political parties and NGO's had signed their pledge to support five specific legislative reforms to advance human rights and women's rights in the implementation of the new Iraqi constitution. The event was well-managed for television, which is now the principal vehicle for political communication in Iraq -- at least for those parties without networks of mosques. Seven television networks covered the press conference. Sophisticated campaign collateral was used to promote the event and the human rights and women's rights goals the group is trying to advance with Iraqi political leaders. The group wants to see Iraqi politicians who campaign on promises to promote human rights and women's rights held accountable for delivering on those promises after the December 15 election. End summary.

2. (U) 'Ahad al-Iraq (Iraq's Promise) held a press conference in the Baghdad Convention Center on December 12 to announce the success of their program to attract cross-ethnic, cross-sectarian political support for their campaign to advance women's rights and human rights in Iraq. The seven women on the dais represented Iraqi liberal, centrist and moderate Islamist views. (Three covered their hair; four did not.) The group organized itself in July to carry out a three-part program: to influence Iraqi political leaders to adopt constitutional provisions that protect and advance women's rights and human rights, to get the constitution adopted, and to educate the Iraqi public on and build support for women's rights and human rights in the December 15, 2005 election and in the implementation period afterwards.

3. (SBU) 'Ahad al-Iraq's membership bridges the NGO and political worlds. Among its members are civil society leaders and a number of candidates for the Iraqi Council of Representatives (CoR). The press conference illustrated the maturation of Iraqi politics. Some 71 people attended, including politicians, journalists, NGO's and their staff, with press conference moderator Azhar al-Shaykhly, Minister of State for Women's Affairs, announcing that an early road closure in much of Baghdad had held up some of those wanting to attend. The main purpose of the conference was to get television coverage for the group's pledge and, not coincidentally, to highlight support of Iraq's leading politicians for the pledge. Everything was focused on television coverage. Seven television networks sent cameras, including al-Iraqiyya, al-Sharqiyya, Sumeriya, Baghdadiyya, and al-Arabiya. Politicians who had signed the pledge and attended the press conference were invited first to join 'Ahad al-Iraq members on the dais for a televised camera spray. Several gave short speeches that gave them extra camera time. A select number, including Maysoon Damaluji (on the National Iraqi List (731) for Ninewa province), and Mithal al-Aloosi (on the eponymous Mithal al-Aloosi for Iraqi Nation (620) list), gave one-on-one interviews to al-Iraqiya and Baghdadiya networks. (Note: As a sober reminder of the mood of centrist Iraqi politics today, Damaluji quipped to PolOff as she was being pulled aside to give an interview to one television network "I may say something that will get me killed." End note.)

4. (U) The core of the current phase of 'Ahad al-Iraq's campaign has been to get leading centrist and moderate Muslim politicians to sign a pledge to reform five provisions of the constitution and to develop constructive provisions in the implementing legislation in the new Iraqi constitution. The group wants (1) human rights guaranteed by article 16 to be enforceable by Iraq's High Commission for Human Rights; (2) a law to ensure that article 36, which guarantees free speech provided it is "does not disturb public order and morality" cannot be used to silence criticism of the government or freedom of assembly; (3) a law that interprets article 39 to guarantee Iraqis a choice of the civil courts, not just religious courts, to resolve personal status issues; (4) the law determining membership on the Federal Supreme Court to require that judges be experts in civil law and that experts in Islamic jurisprudence should be advisory only, (5) to ensure that

the Iraqi High Commission on Human Rights can be effective in promoting human rights within the government. The group also wants to see only the universally agreed tenets of Islam be used as a referent for legislation, and for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to be used as one of the bases of determining whether legislation is in accord with democratic principles.

15. (U) More than 270 political personalities, parties and NGO's had signed their pledge, including most prominent members of the Iraqi liberal, centrist and moderate Muslim democratic parts of the spectrum. Signatories to the pledge included former President Ghazi al-Yawer; former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi; three Deputy Prime Ministers -- Ahmad Chalabi 'Abd Mutlak al-Jabury, and Rosch Shaways, former Deputy Prime Minister and current Planning Minister Barham Salih; former Human Rights minister Bakhtiar Amin; former Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Layla 'Abd al-Latif; President of the Transitional National Assembly (TNA) Hajim al-Hassani, Deputy President of the National Assembly Arif Tayfour Arif; former Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) member Adnan Pachachi, TNA member and sometime UIA spokesman 'Ali al-Dabbagh; TNA member Mithal al-Aloosi; TNA member and Iraqi Interim National Conference president Fu'ad Ma'sum; Minister of the Environment Nermain Othman Hassan; TNA member Shaykh Husayn 'Ali al-Sha'lan; National Security Adviser Mowaffaq al-Rubay'e; TNA member and former IGC member Yonadan Kanna, PM Ja'fari's spokesman Laith Rubba; Iraqi Communist Party leader Hamid Majid Musa, former IGC member Raja'a al-Khuza'i, former IGC member Ahmad al-Barak; TNA member Amal Kashif al-Ghita of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA); politicians Adnan al-Duleimy; 'Aziz al-Yassiri; and Hatem Mukhlis.

16. (U) Sadrist politician Sami al-Askari also signed, as did former IGC member Songul Chapouk; TNA member Izzat al-Shabandar; and KDP's Dilshad Muran. Other parties that signed or had members who signed include Faily Kurds, Iraqi Turkomen, the Kurdish parties, the National Iraqi List, the Iraqi Islamic Party, Sunni parties, Assyrian Christian parties, tribal parties, the Royal Constitutional Movement, the Ummah Party, various NGO's. The name that provoked the most positive response from the audience was that of Judge Rizgar Hama Amin, presiding judge in the Saddam Hussein trial, who also signed the pledge. All politicians had their names read aloud for the television cameras, which served to give them free publicity that they may hope will benefit them in the election, but will also serve to register their public commitment for after the election.

17. (U) 'Ahad al-Iraq members Safiya Suhayl al-Tamimi, Maysoon Damaluji, and Ahlam al-Jabary gave speeches to the group. Of the politicians given the floor to make brief remarks, Mithal al-Alusi gave a fiery speech in which he promoted 'Ahad al-Iraq's vision of human rights and women's rights, then openly and pointedly criticized "religious fanaticism" in Iraq today. Perhaps as a counterweight, organizers then had two religious shaykhs set out moderate visions of Islam, including a moderate Islamist version of women's rights, and the many ways in which Islam supported and protected human rights.

18. (U) Campaign collateral was plentiful and evident, with banners both behind and in front of the dais, posters around the room, and giveaways for attendees -- blue scarves with "Ahad al-Iraq" in gold, small books with the pledge printed inside, notepads, calendar/diaries for 2006 with "Ahad al-Iraq" logos, campaign buttons, and free magazines on women's issues.

19. (SBU) Comment. 'Ahad al-Iraq organized this event not only to publicize their own activities, but also in a more sophisticated way to give Iraqi politicians who share their views a small boost in publicity. They also used the event to try to nail those same politicians' feet to the floor for after the election -- saying that if the politicians want to say they support human rights -- as virtually all politicians in Iraq today say they do -- and if they want to say they support women's rights, they will be held politically accountable by these women and their support networks, at least, on their pledges. (It is not yet clear how much support these networks have beyond an upper-class crust in Baghdad.) The women of 'Ahad al-Iraq indicated they want to continue their work to hold the Iraqi political leaders to be elected December 15 to their commitments to promote a centrist, cross-ethnic, cross-sectarian vision of human rights and women's rights in Iraq. It is also apparent from who was not at the press conference that harder line Islamist parties like Da'wa and SCIRI were not willing to sign on, though it is noteworthy that a number of politicians with indisputable democratic Islamist credentials, like Sami al-Askari and 'Amal Kashif al-Ghita, were willing to sign the 'Ahad al-Iraq pledge. End comment.

KHALILZAD